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ABSTRACT

This study examines restructuring from principals' perspectives. It explores restructuring as a "deal" between a district and individual schools, wherein the school receives greater autonomy over budgets, personnel, and school policies, in return for stricter accountability for results, usually defined in terms of student achievement. The study tried to determine whether this conception of restructuring, based on the literature and district policies, matches principals' own perceptions. Two rounds of interviews were conducted with 12 high-school principals in an urban midwestern district implementing school-based management and enhanced accountability systems. District documents served as secondary data sources. Despite the introduction of site-based management, nine principals did not see their district as an example of "the deal," as there was no real autonomy at the school level. Several principals argued that the district was unwilling to grant "real power" to the schools. Three principals did see their district as moving toward a deal. Nine believed that the deal was fair in theory, so long as schools had real autonomy and adequate resources. Two principals felt that schools should be monitored closely by the central office. Included are one table, one figure, and eight references. (MLH)

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Principal Perceptions of Restructuring: Is There a "Deal" Between Districts and Schools?

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Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)

Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association
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Introduction

This study examines restructuring from the perspective of principals. It explores the concept of restructuring as *a deal* between a district and individual schools wherein the school receives greater **autonomy** over budgets, personnel, and school policies, in return for stricter **accountability** for results, usually defined in terms of student achievement. The study explores whether this conception of restructuring, based on the restructuring literature and district policies, matches principals' perceptions of restructuring.

Early efforts are underway to implement such a deal in an urban mid-Western school district. The district is implementing site-based management (SBM), and an accountability plan to hold schools accountable for results as measured by a new student assessment system of traditional standardized tests and alternative assessments. This study examines the perceptions of high school principals in the district toward this emerging deal.

Theoretical Framework

A branch of the school restructuring movement emphasizes giving individual schools greater autonomy while holding schools accountable for "results." This restructuring movement -- what I call *the deal* -- has three main features (see Figure 1). First is the idea of a deal between schools and districts: schools are allowed greater autonomy, including control over resources, in return for greater accountability for results. In David's (1989) study of restructuring in five school districts, the districts "are striking new bargains with schools; in exchange for increased authority and flexibility at the school site, principals and teachers must demonstrate results" (p. 37). Newmann and Wehlage (1995) argue that under restructuring, educational decisions are decentralized while schools are held to high, external standards, measured by new forms of assessment.

The second feature of *the deal* is that the school building is seen as the nexus for change. As Bryk, Deabster, Easton, Luppescu, and Thum (1994) note, the reforms in Chicago reflect "a growing trend to hold individual schools, rather than districts, accountable and to measure their progress from changes in annual student assessment" (p. 307). Fuhrman and Elmore (1992) argue that an "increasingly prevalent reform vision locates more decisions about specific curricula, the organization of instruction, and pedagogy at the school" (p. 1). Kentucky's comprehensive reform effort places accountability for results at the level of the school, rather than the district (Guskey, 1994).

This leads to the third feature of *the deal*, namely that schools receive incentives and sanctions based on results. A school where student performance improves or meets an agreed-upon standard may receive a cash bonus or other reward. In contrast, a school that declines or falls below the standard may be expected to develop an improvement plan or be subject to stricter state oversight.

Data Sources and Methodology

The researcher conducted two rounds of interviews with twelve high school principals in order to understand their perceptions of the district's new deal. District documents served as secondary data sources. These documents included the assessment and accountability drafts and plans, central staff memos relating to the restructuring effort, training materials developed as part of the implementation process, and press releases. Finally, background data was collected from meetings with district central staff and from attending school board meetings.

The primary method for collecting data was through intensive interviewing. During these interviews, the researcher took notes, tape recorded the interviews, and transcribed these tapes. Interviewing each principal twice served to confirm initial analyses and give principals opportunities to elaborate on their perceptions and concerns. This approach is a modified version of the hermeneutic dialectic process suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989). They argue that this approach helps the researcher to understand each actor's construction of reality and controls for the quality of the research by constantly checking the data collected.

Notes and transcripts from the interviews were analyzed utilizing Miles and Huberman's (1984) suggestions for qualitative analysis through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The use of a qualitative software package (NUDIST) facilitated the rounds of re-coding necessary to draw and verify conclusions.

Results

Despite the introduction of site-based management, nine of the twelve principals did not see their district as an example of *the deal*, since there was not real autonomy at the school level (see Table 1). Several principals argued that the central office was not willing to give "real power" to the schools. In other words, budgetary and hiring power was devolved to schools on paper, but not in practice. Thus, there might be greater accountability, but there was not greater autonomy.

Three principals, however, did see their district as a deal -- or at least as moving toward a deal. Under some of the restructuring initiatives, a few principals saw real attempts by the district to decentralize power to their schools. Through increased flexibility in hiring, the ability to change the school schedule with the support of teachers, and principal input into the budget cuts at their school, these principals saw tangible evidence that the district was moving ahead with site-based management.

Nine of 12 principals stated that *the deal* was fair in theory, as long as there were assurances that schools would have real autonomy and adequate resources (e.g., site-based management would not be accompanied by a cut in their budgets). As one principal noted, the danger of the deal was that the district could "pull the plug" at any time. With a new superintendent or school board members, with increased public pressure for results, schools might find that they do not have enough time to show that improvement efforts at their schools were working.

While most principals did not see a deal in the district, their responses to questions about accountability lent themselves to discussions of the deal. Many principals noted that they needed “support” in order to be held accountable, in terms of resources and specific powers. Thus, principals wanted to make an implicit deal with the district: resources and autonomy for accountability.

Despite the general interest in a “real deal” with the district, two principals argued that schools should not have too much autonomy. One suggested that schools need to be monitored closely by the central office, since some failing schools might need outside intervention by the district. Another principal argued that schools should not be allowed to do their own thing in a district with high student mobility. In such a situation, there needed to be a certain level of uniformity from school to school. In addition, decisions by one school could affect other schools in the system, so there needed to be some central coordination around decision-making:

Say we can reallocate staff. One year we want 50 teachers, and the next year we want 40. What happens to the other 10 teachers? If they have seniority, they will bump teachers in other schools. So other schools will be affected by our school’s decisions.

Conclusions

Principals are charged with carrying out many of the reforms designed at the state and district level. This study highlights the importance of understanding the perspectives of these key actors in the restructuring process. Principals in this study questioned the reality of restructuring rhetoric. They argued that autonomy existed on paper only, as numerous forces limited a school’s autonomy. Finally, principals questioned the systemic nature of the restructuring effort in the district. Was restructuring an example of systemic or shotgun reform? As principals argued, restructuring will remain rhetoric until it reflects deeds as well as words.

This study also points to the often wide gap between restructuring theories and practices and the daily lives and students and teachers. For the most part, the issues discussed by principals related to the authenticity of the deal. But the critical question is: will a fully implemented deal would result in “restructuring” in terms of teaching and learning? Will a change in the locus of accountability and autonomy be a key leverage point for improving student achievement? This study suggests that it is a long road from *the deal* to the classroom.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for the Deal

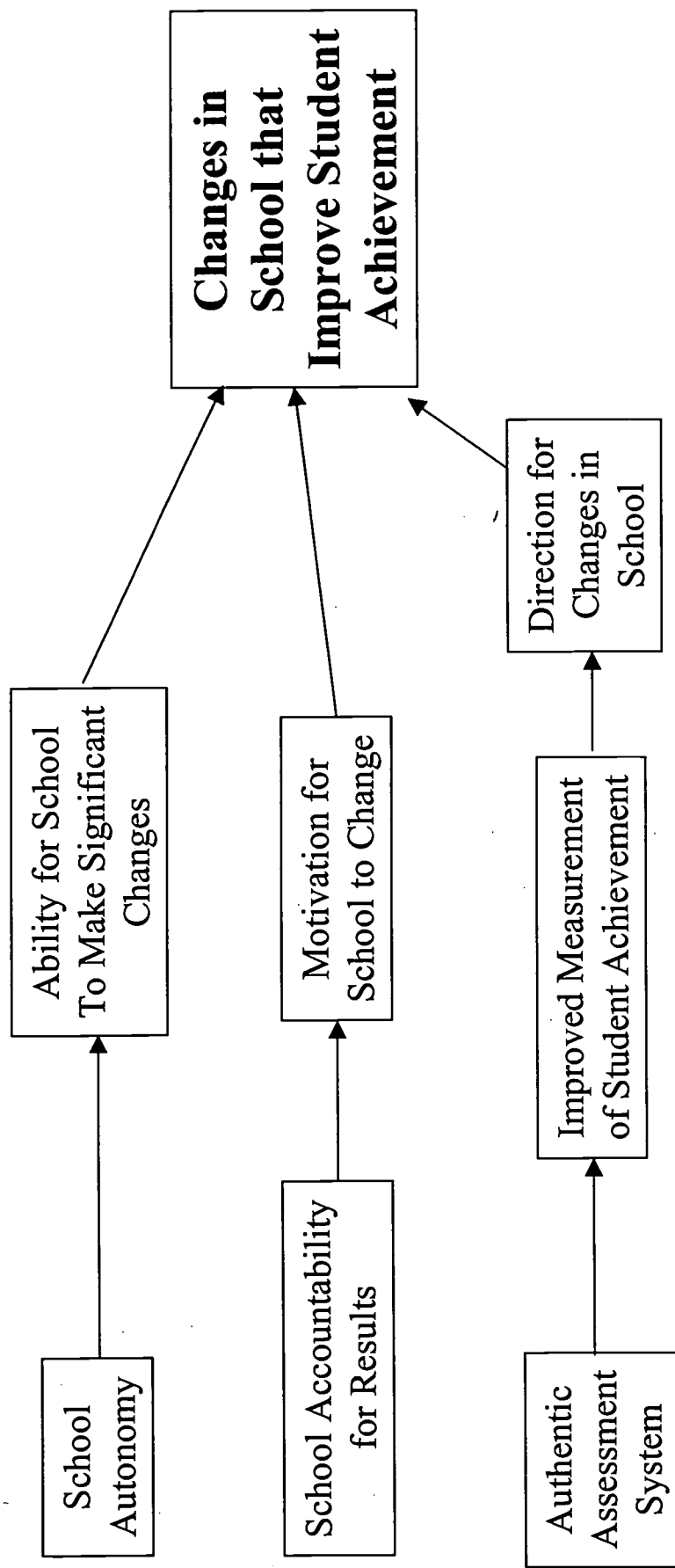


Table 1
Perceptions of the Deal

Is There a Deal in the District?
<p>No, Since There Is Not Real Autonomy (9)</p> <p>I don't think they've offered a lot of autonomy, so I'm not sure any deal has been made.</p> <p>If you don't have resources and you don't control time, you don't have control over anything. The only thing we control is the school, and that's because no one else has figured out how to do it. So I don't think there's a deal.</p> <p>There are so few things we can actually control. We're not like charter schools that have more autonomy. I have problems with the word autonomy. It almost doesn't exist. I can't think of anything where I make an absolute decision.</p>
<p>District May Be Moving Toward a Deal (3)</p> <p>There's been an honest attempt by central to put some things on the table. People seem willing to relinquish a little bit of control, which is exciting. Things have gotten better.</p> <p>The board is giving us more autonomy over the budget, although we don't like what they're giving us. There is a process in place to modify the schedule. We have some autonomy in the selection of staff, and we're definitely involved in the retention of staff.</p>
In Theory, Is the Deal Fair?
<p>Yes, If There Is Real Autonomy and Adequate Resources (9)</p> <p>The deal should not just be autonomy for accountability. It should be autonomy with resources and authority over personnel.</p> <p>You should give schools the entire budget, and let them start from scratch. No teachers' contract. Every department would request their budget, and staff that performed exceptionally could be eligible for bonuses.</p> <p>It's a good tradeoff if in fact I can come to an agreement with central about what autonomy means.</p> <p>If central gave us money to use as we liked, gave us all that autonomy, then I need to be held accountable for what I'm doing. It goes hand in hand. I think ultimately, that's the way to go.</p>
<p>No, We Need Central Monitoring and a System-wide Perspective (2)</p> <p>What if you have a school that's going down the tubes and they're too ashamed to ask for help? Is it fair to the students in that school? There has to be a certain amount of monitoring.</p> <p>You need a district-wide approach to education, not 80-some schools each doing something different. Also, when we make staff cuts, we need to think about the impact on the system. How are cuts at my school going to affect other schools, through bumping less senior teachers at other schools?</p>

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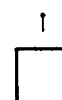


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